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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CALCUTTA 000541

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SUBJECT: MUSLIMS LAMENT LACK OF JOBS, EDUCATION IN WEST BENGAL

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CLASSIFIED BY: Henry Jardine, Principal Officer, AMCONSUL ,
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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1. (C) SUMMARY: On November 8-9, Poloff visited the majority Muslim district of Murshidabad along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border to discuss socioeconomic and security concerns with district officials, local politicians, and journalists. Discussions echoed the findings of the Rajinder Sachar Committee report on the socioeconomic condition of Indian Muslims that was presented in the Lok Sabha on December 1. Our contacts highlighted high unemployment and drop-out rates due to government discrimination as the primary socioeconomic challenges facing the Muslim community in Murshidabad and West Bengal and downplayed the impact of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. The district has seen a rise in the number of religious schools (madrassas) in recent years, funded largely by a few affluent members of the local community and some foreign donors. The government says it has launched programs to support the Muslim community, but NGOs working in the border region report that these programs exist only on paper. Finally, our contacts offered mixed views toward the US and US-India relations. END SUMMARY.

GRIEVANCES CENTER ON DISCRIMINATION AND DEVELOPMENT

12. (SBU) Murshidabad, a West Bengal district approximately 200 kilometers north of Kolkata, has a population of over 5.8 million and is one of the few districts in India where Muslims constitute more than 60 percent of the population. The eastern side of the district shares a 110-kilometer border with Bangladesh largely demarcated by the Bhagirathi River. Poloff met with district officials, local politicians, and journalists to discuss issues affecting the border region.

13. (SBU) Politicians and journalists expressed grave concern about the lack of economic and educational opportunities leading to high unemployment and drop-out rates among Muslims. They attributed this to government officials' discrimination in not providing public sector jobs and higher education to Muslims. The editor of the Murshidabad News, the district's main vernacular paper, said that the problem arises because the government views Muslim migrants from Bangladesh as illegal immigrants but Hindu migrants as refugees. Just two percent of the district's population holds a government job, and these jobs are given to Hindus. He added that the district's literacy rate was less than 50 percent and the unemployment rate among Muslims was at least 80 percent. While some people are able to find work in transport, the service sector, and a local thermal power plant, the vast majority of the employed work in the beedi-rolling (cigarette) industry. Separately, local political party leaders, including district leaders from the ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), explained that it was a difficult task to elevate the Muslim community in West Bengal after the 1971 partition because only poor and uneducated Muslims stayed in India, and they have had few opportunities to establish themselves.

14. (SBU) Politicians and journalists explained that Muslims face direct discrimination in higher education as well as indirect discrimination in primary and secondary schools. Many Muslim families cannot afford to send their children to primary and secondary school because the opportunity cost, a day's wages of

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20 rupees, is prohibitive. (Note: 1 dollar = approximately 45 rupees. End note.) The drop-out rate among Muslim students in primary and secondary school far exceeds that of Hindu students, even those belonging to the poorer scheduled castes and tribes.

15. (SBU) Our discussions were consistent with the findings of the Rajinder Sachar Committee report on the socioeconomic condition of Indian Muslims that was presented in the Lok Sabha on December 1. The report points out that Muslims constitute 25 percent of the population in West Bengal, but they hold just 4.2 percent of government jobs and are not represented at all in the state's public sector units.

BANGLADESH BORDER PROBLEMS DOWNPLAYED

16. (C) In Murshidabad, people were reluctant to talk about the role of illegal immigration on the region's socioeconomic status. Illegal immigration is a sensitive political issue in West Bengal since many Muslims who immigrate illegally from Bangladesh easily obtain voting cards and constitute a sizeable vote bank for the ruling CPM. According to the Murshidabad Superintendent of Police (SP), the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) maintains a heavy presence in the district with approximately 3,200 soldiers guarding against infiltration, immigration, trafficking, and smuggling. The SP said that the border was clearly demarcated in his district and downplayed any threats. The SP admitted, however, that the central government has increased pressure on the border districts to control illegal border activity. He said that the GOI recently issued instructions to all police chiefs in districts bordering Bangladesh to keep extra vigil in the coming months and to submit daily reports on border crossings. When asked about reports that terrorists involved in the July 11 Mumbai attack had infiltrated from Bangladesh, he said that all of the

investigations into terrorist attacks inside India had failed to link attacks to infrastructure or individual in Murshidabad.

¶7. (C) All of our other contacts in Murshidabad agreed that it was easy to cross the border but denied the existence of infrastructure on the Indian side that could facilitate infiltration. They explained that the Muslim community was very frustrated, but their dissatisfaction was directed at the state and federal government rather than the Hindu community.

GAINING INSIGHT INTO MADRASSA EDUCATION

¶8. (SBU) Murshidabad, like other border districts, has seen a growth in madrassas in recent years. Some of these schools are privately funded by a few affluent Muslims in the community, such as local beedi traders. Some schools limit coursework to religious subjects, while others incorporate modern subjects into the curriculum. When asked about job opportunities for graduating students, the principal of a boys madrassa said that most of his graduates become Imams at various mosques in West Bengal. However, there are insufficient jobs within the religious community for these graduates, and often a lack of instruction in modern subjects makes them ill-equipped for other work.

¶9. (SBU) During follow-up meetings in Kolkata, NGOs working in the border region explained that the vast majority of students still choose government schools over madrassas because they see little future in a religious education. Nonetheless, the drop-out rates are astronomical because of the economic opportunity cost and the lack of English-medium instruction. English is viewed as the best way to advance oneself, but government schools do not provide English instruction until the

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fourth grade, and most students have dropped out by then. Madrassa drop-out rates are slightly lower.

GOVERNMENT EFFORTS LACKING; NGOS TRYING TO FILL VOID

¶10. (SBU) West Bengal has made some efforts to address these socioeconomic discrepancies. The West Bengal Minority Development Finance Corporation field supervisor for Murshidabad said that the state government provides zero-interest loans to minorities, stipends of 200 to 400 rupees per month to minority university students, and discounted liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to minority villages.

¶11. (SBU) Unfortunately, NGOs report that most government programs to support the minority community exist only on paper. The government has run some effective programs-specifically, the provision of drinking water and free polio vaccinations-but efforts to improve agriculture, education, and public health are almost nonexistent. Government efforts to mainstream madrassa education by modernizing curriculum and recognizing madrassa-issued degrees similarly have not progressed beyond the planning phase.

¶12. (SBU) A mix of secular and religiously-affiliated NGOs is trying to fill the void. Secular organizations primarily focus on education, public health, and income generation, while Muslim religious organizations mainly focus on education. A major push for both groups is paying the marriage costs for girls so they are less dependent on prostitution and exploitative labor. NGOs report that raising awareness about public health remains their biggest challenge, explaining that it took 30 years to raise awareness about polio before the problem was adequately managed.

¶13. (SBU) One NGO contact explained that secular and Muslim-affiliated organizations operating in Muslim-majority

areas are primarily funded by a few affluent patrons within the Muslim community and some donors in Europe, the US, and the Middle East. All organizations registered under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) are able to receive foreign contributions without Indian government intervention. So far, religious organizations, including madrassas, receive only marginal support from "Muslims in Saudi Arabia and other countries," although they could "easily obtain more if they wished." Those madrassas recognized by the Government of West Bengal also receive some funding from the state.

MIXED VIEWS TOWARD THE US

¶14. (SBU) Our interlocutors held favorable views of Americans and were mildly supportive of US-India ties, however, they expressed strong reservations about asymmetry in the US-India relationship. They were suspicious of alleged US plans to "subjugate" India and control its foreign policy, a common sentiment in CPM-dominated West Bengal, and they remained severely critical of US policy in the Middle East. They were frustrated by a perceived discrepancy in US policy toward the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and underlined that the Indian Muslim community was irate about the verdict in the Saddam Hussein trial.

¶15. (SBU) Despite these reservations, community leaders welcomed greater cultural exchanges and US outreach to Indian Muslims, particularly in the areas of education and development. Our contacts particularly were interested in the impact of September 11 on Muslims in the US. They were pleasantly surprised to hear about US outreach programs and agreed that a significant gap existed between local perceptions of US policy, based largely on select media reports, and reality.

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COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) The lack of employment and higher education opportunities for Muslims in the border region has produced a large minority community that is disproportionately unemployed and illiterate. The problem often is exacerbated by the popular view that it is a "waste of time" to send children to primary and secondary school since they will have no chance to obtain government jobs or higher education. While conceding the ease with which one can cross the India-Bangladesh border, people focus blame on Indian government discrimination and dismiss the impact of illegal immigration for creating a preponderance of Muslim poverty. This is a common view given the political sensitivity of immigration, the cultural affinity shared by Bengalis on both sides of the border, and the reluctance of district officials responsible for securing the border to disclose their shortcomings. With the continued inflow of Bangladeshi migrants and the government's lack of progress in elevating the socioeconomic status of the minority community, we can expect the disparities and resulting minority discontent to grow.

¶17. (SBU) Toward the US, Muslim views appear to be shaped by suspicions about US intentions toward India and inaccurate perceptions of US policy toward the Muslim world. However, the receptiveness of our interlocutors toward cultural exchanges and US outreach efforts is a positive sign and an opportunity to bridge what appears to be a large communication gap. JARDINE